

"Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home": Time & Place in Canadian Women's History

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As enthusiasm for women's history gained momentum in the 1970s, scholars moved beyond the discussion of suffrage and labour force exploitation to describe the features of women's culture as it changed over time. The products of this research--studies of women's domestic labour, child-rearing practices, friendship networks, lifespan choices¹--have revolutionized not only the way that we see the roles of women in the past but also how we assess the past generally. The study of women's culture is based on the assumption that "women have distinct experiences and values and that these must be studied as unique contributions to culture."² It assumes, as Eliane Silverman has recently argued, that women have historically lived dual lives: "one in the male culture where they are controlled by tradition, fear, loyalty and love; the other in a parallel society of women where their actions could range from intimacy to power."³ Viewed from this perspective, tracing the contours of women's culture becomes central to writing women's history. Of course, women's culture is not a monolith. There are many women's cultures that must be studied if we are to understand the complexity of women's lives. Indeed, a major goal of those working in the field of women's history is to make it impossible for historians ever again to resort to oversimplifications which hide or trivialize women's past experience; in short, to make it impossible to write history without accounting for the active role of half the human race.⁴

The linking of gender with what Mary O'Brien has termed those other "commatized" categories of research--class, ethnicity, region--has already given birth to major achievements in the field of Canadian women's history.⁵ Pioneering studies such as *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*,⁶ *L'histoire des femmes au Québec depuis quatre siècles*⁷ and *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in British Columbia*⁸ focus fruitfully on "limited"

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Canadian identities. The work on Western Canada by Jennifer Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk, Susan Jackel, Eliane Silverman and Meg Luxton has demonstrated the unique contribution made by women to a resource frontier too-long described exclusively in masculine terms.⁹ The possibilities of gender and region are not yet fully exhausted. Little, for example, has been published on the women of Atlantic Canada and the North; ethnic minorities such as Oriental women in British Columbia or Anglo-Quebecois women tend to have fallen through the cracks of larger general categories; class and culture in the context of Canadian women beg further consideration.¹⁰

An elaboration of the varieties of women's culture is more than an academic exercise for professional historians or an amusement for idle amateurs. It is an act of political awakening. As long as we continue to define our past only in terms of American or European research or even in terms of developments in other regions of Canada, we remain alienated from our own historical reality. I am continually reminded as I speak on local history in Nova Scotia how grateful women are to learn about their foremothers. More than at any time in our history, we need to make sense of our past and feel in touch with local traditions which have all-too-often been neglected in our pursuit of the "larger" forces explaining women's experiences. I would further argue that because women's lives have been dominated historically by the domestic and community context, it is doubly important that we analyze women's culture as it reproduces and modifies itself in specific places and specific times.

The pursuit of women's culture will transform not only how we study women historically but also how we "do" history generally. Demographic studies will expand to include analyses of women's unique experiences such as the changing ages of menstruation and menopause; economic and technological history will incorporate women's domestic production in its romp from fish, fur and wheat to railways and industry; political and legal history will account for the differential treatment of women in politics and law. Virtually every historical topic is evaluated differently when seen through the eyes of women. It is frequently noted, for example, that Nova Scotia was, in 1848, the first colony in the British Empire to win responsible government. It is almost never recorded that only three years later the male victors in this political struggle deliberately disenfranchised women.¹¹ In any political history of Nova Scotia written from a woman's perspective, the fact that 50% of the population was robbed of its citizenship by a public act of parliament would constitute a significant historical event.

Similarly, our immigrant experience takes on a different complexion when seen from the point of view of its female contingent. That much-studied group, the Loyalists, for instance, included not only soldiers, men of principle and fortune seekers but also women and children. As described by diarist Sarah Frost, women experienced special difficulties associated with emigration:

Our women with their children all came on board today, and there is great confusion in the cabin. We bear it pretty well through the day, but as it grows toward night, one child cries in one place and one in another, whilst we are getting them to bed. I think

sometimes I shall be crazy. There are so many of them if they were still as common there would be a great noise amongst them. I stay on deck tonight until nigh eleven o'clock, and now I think I will go down and retire for the night if I can find a place to sleep.¹²

This passage takes on added meaning when we realize that Sarah is eight months pregnant. This condition may have influenced her reaction upon arrival in Saint John harbour on 29 June 1783: "This morning it looks very pleasant on the shore. I am just going ashore with my children to see how I like it. Later--it is now afternoon and I have been ashore. It is, I think, the roughest land I ever saw." Since many Loyalist women left their homes because of political decisions made by their husbands, they may well have been less than enthusiastic about their enforced exile. Any balanced account of the Loyalist experience must consider how these women reproduced their culture in the British North American environment and how their values and attitudes influenced the society which they helped to build.¹³

In taking up the issue of women's culture we are addressing fundamental questions of sources and methodology. We are shifting the focus of analysis from the world of men to that of women. If public and published documents are few and macro studies difficult, then we must investigate personal and private sources with greater seriousness. If women's participation in politics is peripheral and labour force activity is muffled then we turn to local and family histories where women have figured prominently both as participants and as chroniclers. When approaching history from a woman's angle of vision the question becomes not "Why did women not protest their deliberate disenfranchisement in the era of responsible government," but "What characterized the lives of middle class British North American women in the nineteenth century?" Not "Why are women marginalized in the early trade union movement?" but "What are the essential features of working class women's lives?" Not "Why have women been relegated to the private sphere in industrial societies?" but "How has women's sphere been transformed by the emergence of industrial society?" The answers to questions such as these will allow us to transcend the less ambitious queries and lay the foundation for a genuine human history.

My own research interests, which are presently being conducted in cooperation with Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, focus on the women of Atlantic Canada.¹⁴ Published and public documents on women in these four seaboard provinces are rare. Fortunately, other evidence of women's activity is abundant: handwritten memoirs, diaries, family letters, scrapbooks, genealogies, local histories, minutes of meetings, recipes, samplers, poems, quill baskets,¹⁵ quilts and rugs comprise the material legacy which these women have bequeathed to us and with which we must come to terms.

Handwritten memoirs, diaries, personal letters, scrapbooks, genealogies, local histories and minutes of meetings--the very texture of these documents testifies to the role of women in recording events, keeping in touch and selecting information to be passed on to succeeding generations. The subjectivity of memoirs, diaries and autobiographical letters appealed to us as did the volume of information they offered on women's daily lives and life

span choices. As we eventually realized, the sheer bulk of these chronicles was itself significant. Outmigration has been a constant feature of Atlantic Canada's history.¹⁶ The diaries and letters chronicling this diaspora were not only a means whereby women kept in touch with extended kinship networks but were also a way of making sense of their highly mobile and surprisingly literate lives.

While the majority of the chroniclers in Atlantic Canada were native born Canadians and came from rural villages and small towns, it is obvious that they shared aspects of common North Atlantic culture. Since most of these women were descendants of British and American immigrants, this came as no surprise. What did surprise us was the extent to which women of various class and ethnic groups felt compelled to preserve their life stories. Many left behind diaries or memoirs; others, autobiographical letters, often written to the same person, describing in meticulous detail the rhythms of daily life. Such documents are extremely valuable tools for learning how the larger historical forces intersect with women's daily realities--how "census time" intersects with "women's time." They help us to understand what it means to be a mother of 4.6 children and have a life expectancy of 58.4 years or to be a sixteen year old teacher in a one-room school house on a salary of \$200 a year. Learning to read these often tantalizingly elusive sources makes them no longer the boring and insignificant documents that archivists and bibliographers have led us to believe. Instead, they enable us to construct life stories that reveal much about the women who are conspicuously absent from our public records. The life stories of Maritime women raise many fascinating questions about women's culture but I want to focus on time and place in women's history.

Recent scholarship has given us a whole new vocabulary for discussing changes in time and place as they relate to women. "Industrial time," "family time," "social maps," "genealogical space" are concepts which help us to describe various components of women's culture.¹⁷ Though Canadian women have not been like the Matapuguio of Peru for whom time and place are so intertwined that they have the same word for both concepts,¹⁸ we can understand how they interact when we consider the ideal place of women in pre-industrial society: childhood and adolescence in a father's home; marriage and motherhood in a husband's home; widowhood in a son's home. In each stage of life, women were confined by domestic space identified with the male head of household. Major turning points in a woman's life were defined by the change in home ownership and often, though not always, by a change in domicile.

The roles of daughter, wife/mother and widow reflect "family time" which is punctuated by such events as marriage and death of a parent or husband. These in turn were constrained by specific events in "women's time", most notably menstruation, motherhood and menopause. Such deeply entrenched roles were neither easily cast aside nor wholly useless in adapting to new environments. Tamara Hareven has brought to our attention the extent to which particular concepts of family time, nurtured in rural pre-industrial settings, were adapted and idealized in urban industrial ones; how the well-worn rhythms of the household became consoling rituals in the paid

workplace; and how women's concept of family and community were creatively reproduced over time in vastly different circumstances.¹⁹ While this cultural continuity may have suited patriarchal husbands and was easily exploited by greedy capitalists, it also reflected the desperate attempt of women to emerge from the trauma of social change with something familiar still intact.

Though much research still needs to be done on women's culture in colonial British North America, we know that the time and place of women in rural pre-industrial societies were often regulated on a weekly and seasonal basis. Consider for instance, these passages from the phonetically written diary of twenty year old Phoebe Collins of Halifax County, who was writing in 1815:

15 August 1815

The dairy as usual takes up most of my morning on Fridays and after finishing there I picked a basket of black currents for Miss Beamish--in the afternoon I sowed a little while and then went out and raked hay. I wrote a note to my friend Harriet this evening....Mama is now tying up her radishes and turnips for market tomorrow morning. As that don't belong to my part of the work I have left her to her self.

16 Sept. 1815

It is Saturday this morning and as usual cleaning house--after that was over I went to spinning and spun a large ball....I took a run before night and got a few blackberries....I have been sitting by the kitchen fire knitting this evening, I am preparing for winter.

6 October 1815

This morning I was very busy in my dairy churning and making butter; Harriet was helping me churn; the remainder of the day we sit up stairs reading and knitting. Patience and Perseverence is the title of the book we are perusing. I think it a very good thing. The weather has been rather dull to day which prevented us from taking a walk. I have left them all seated around the table at their domestic employments, some sowing and others knitting, and Papa at the head reading....²⁰

Or this passage describing an annual housecleaning, written by seventy-nine year old Mary Smith of Cape Breton on June 22, 1891:

A very dry high easterly wind. The first tub Butter full 22 lbs. The little mare very sick. The boys hear helping doctor her. Flora washed her weeks washing. I washed breakfast dishes then cleared the kitchen cupboard and washed all the things that was in it and after that the men moved it out of the clothes room into the kitchen. I washed dinner dishes and then had a rest and Sarah moved everything out of the dining room took up the carpet and swept and dusted and I washed the windows. The two girls washed up the floor and Sarah got tea ready and after tea she churned. Flora picked

the geese and then put them down in the calf pasture; the children and G.P. finished picking stone a little while after dinner and then the men fixed the fence to keep the geese in. Sarah cleaned up the milk house all ready to wash the shelf and the floor and Flora and the girls finished it up.²¹

The ideal of women's place had been brought to the eastern colonies of British North America by British and American settlers and was well entrenched by the time Phoebe Collins was reading *Patience and Perseverance*. As with most ideals, the prescribed role of women was based on a domestic reality that had long included elements of specialization and routine as well as responsibilities assigned by age and gender. Phoebe Collins and Mary Smith lived in a domestic world of creative production and busy social intercourse. Though fathers sat at the head of the table, daughters and wives had their own practical timetable of social and productive activity.

The pattern of these activities changed slowly during the nineteenth century. We do not know when the spinning and weaving which occupied so much of Phoebe's time finally gave way to the consumption of factory-made cloth, though we have diarists in parts of Nova Scotia making cloth at home as late as the 1890s. On the other hand, canning of fruit and vegetables is not mentioned as a domestic chore until the first decade of the twentieth century, when glass bottles became readily available at reasonable prices. The tasks of housecleaning, cooking, sewing and making butter persisted throughout the nineteenth century among our rural diarists and most housewives, like Phoebe Collins' mother, sold a surplus of home production to local markets. One of our diarists, forty five year old Rebecca Ells of Port Williams, Nova Scotia, notes proudly that in the year 1901 she churned 1363¼ pounds of butter.²² She also raised hens and pigs for market and, in the absence of her husband who disappeared to the Klondike for twelve years, helped her son run a mixed commercial farm. Time for Rebecca Ells was money, and place was a close-knit community:

Tues. 29 Jan. 1901

And it has been a busy day for me. I cleaned mince meat this morning and cooked it, make cake etc. Just hurried all morning--Father came in to dinner. Then this afternoon I went to Kentville with my butter and eggs, did several errands and home again. It was beautiful sleighing. After tea Lee and I went to the Port and he got a suit of clothes all through from head to foot. Then we went up to Mary's. Found her in bed but she soon got up and we staid near an hour.

With the support of a dutiful son and a protective father, Rebecca Ells could get along without a husband, though she clearly found his absence an embarrassment. Other women pulled their husbands out of debt by their exertions. Mary Bradley early in the nineteenth century found a lucrative market for her cloth.

Accordingly, I set up my loom, and notified my neighbours, and I soon had plenty of work. I exerted myself to the utmost of my power. I took my pay in

such trade as was suitable for our family's use, which made the payment easy to my customers. I soon got into the way of helping ourselves greatly.²³

Later, she ran a grocery store and kept boarders to supplement the family wage.

For many women, Sundays represented a welcome rest from domestic schedules. Mary Michener of Hantsport described her Sunday activity of 13 May 1849 this way:

This is the Sabbath day....We have been to meeting this morning. Rev. Vaughan preached sacrament followed; it is always a solemn season to me. In the afternoon we went up to see about a Sunday School....After talking the matter over it was arranged for a S. School to be held each Sabbath at nine o'clock. After we were dismissed we went up to Father's and took tea....When we came home, Sam and Mary were at Mr. Michener's; they called here awhile and then went home.²⁴

Sunday for a devout Baptist like Mary Michener offered an opportunity for spiritual and intellectual nourishment as well as social intercourse with friends and relatives. The idealization of Sunday is a regular refrain in many of our nineteenth-century diaries.

As industrialization encroached on domestic production, women's place gradually expanded beyond the domestic sphere to include the paid labour force but *ideally* only for a specific period of time--between the age of leaving school and marriage--and in specific occupations designated feminine. Despite its limitations, the paid labour force offered women an alternative to marriage and, for a few, prolonging 'adolescent' work patterns was preferable to the 'double poverty' of wedded dependence.²⁵

Paid labour had its own rhythms but women invariably brought domestic rituals to the workplace. Ella Liscomb, a secretary in the Bank of Montreal in Sydney, reported on 16 April 1935:

Great housecleaning going on in the office. Drawers ransacked with great shaking of head on the part of Davidson [manager]. Things will be more satisfactory when it is finished, however. All the boys were assisting in the campaign--Eric not so good. I heard him ask Floyd which side of the cabinet was the woman's.²⁶

Worked virtually as a "slave"--a term she herself used--during her six-day work week, Ella found Sundays less inspiring than women who remembered them as one day of rest in their domestic routines: "Always blue on Sundays," Ella wrote. "I don't know why it is, unless I just naturally slump after a busy week." Women in the paid labour force invariably reckoned time by the hands of the clock even if the work hours reflected domestic rather than industrial rhythms. "Enough excitement for one day," Ella concluded. "In the bank from 9:00 this morning until 11:30 tonight with an hour off at 6:30 when I went to Aunt Clara's and had shrimps, salad and cake." Women who worked in the home, in contrast, rarely mentioned a specific time of the day.

Women in the domestic sphere continued to reckon time by family and community anniversaries well into the twentieth century. "Just 50 years ago today since Father and Mother were married in the house where Levi Clark lives now," Rebecca Ells recorded in her diary on 12 March 1901. On 2 May 1901 she noted:

Just eight years ago this morning our darling Willie closed his precious blue eyes forever--Oh how I miss him yet--That dear sweet face--but God knows best and I am sure he is better off--But O I miss him all the time--Churned 12¼ pounds.

Ella Liscombe remembered the boss's birthday because it was the same day as her own. He did not return the courtesy. Industrial time and family time, for him, belonged to strictly separate spheres.

In pre-industrial agrarian societies women were the primary agents of family and community welfare. As the factory system began to transform production and formal education altered child-rearing practices women continued to drop out of school to help a sick mother or widowed father, and quit paid labour to care for aged parents or to marry. Family time thus determined length of schooling, work-force participation, age of marriage and the resources of widows until the welfare state--which women did much to build--began to take over aspects of family welfare. Hannah Richardson, working in a Lynn shoe factory in 1872, found her yearly routine regulated by the work stoppages at the P.P. Sherry Shoe Company and her summer holiday in Yarmouth. Her brief foray into the lucrative paid labour force was terminated when she returned to Nova Scotia to marry in 1873. Similarly, forty year old Lucie Borden, a secretary in the offices of Perry Mason Co. in Boston, was forced to abandon her career to take care of her aged parents in Kingsport, Nova Scotia, even though a married brother lived nearby.²⁷

Generally speaking, our early office and factory workers are curiously silent on matters relating to their paid labour. Instead, their diaries describe the social activities related to their work day and details of shopping, visiting, washing and sewing which dominated evenings and weekends. "This is one of Mark Twain's days on board ship," Lucie Borden noted on 14 April 1905. "Got up, dressed, ate and went to bed" with the slight variation of 8 hours work for Perry Mason Company." Whether such an entry reflects women's alienation in the workplace, a preoccupation with women's sphere, or both, is difficult to say, but the end result is that the diaries of single working women are surprisingly similar in content to those of their homebound counterparts. A day in the life of factory worker Hannah Richardson in 1872 was described in this typical diary entry:

17 January 1872

Cold and snowy. To the shop. May in a while in the morning. Jennie Smith in in the afternoon. I ran over to the boys room a while after tea, came back went to work on Than's shirt. Nehemiah McCs wife died this morning 9 o'clock.

What Hannah did in the shop all day other than receive two friendly visits is never revealed.²⁸

Women in the paid labour force, then, often carried domestic traditions such as housecleaning, the celebration of anniversaries and personal friendships into the workplace. One wonders how industrial society would have evolved had women claimed a larger voice in its organization. Obviously, they would have eliminated some of the frustrations from their work. "A very disgruntled day, rather unhappy morning," Ella noted on 3 January 1935.

Felt discouraged and peeved. Some little thing that Basil said upset me for the entire day. It's the little things that take the toll. I really seem to be getting nowhere at the Bank of Montreal though, and if I try to do my work well and speedily nobody seems to notice. Pride! Pride! Why should I worry whether work is done to my own satisfaction. But that's just the trouble. I really have no fondness at heart for my work and it has become merely a matter of routine day after day.

Of course, as Ella herself noted on 28 February after receiving a paltry raise of \$25.00 a year, "they seem to expect the women to work harder than the men." But instead of acting upon the contradictions of her absurd working conditions she "Became very brave and proceeded to have my desk moved". A retreat into domestic routine offered defiance of the inequitable business world in which she found herself.

Those women who followed the traditional course of marriage and motherhood often found their domestic base disrupted as men moved in search of a family wage. Significantly, no married women in our diary samples ever worked outside the home. When confronted with an alien environment they found comfort in performing domestic rituals. Annie Butler resorted to this alternative to despair when as a bride she accompanied her sea captain husband on a voyage from Yarmouth to South America in 1871:

8 April 1871

I dreamed of Nellie last night helping her put her house to rights.

18th. April

John has gone ashore and I am into housecleaning strong. I have got one of the men helping me. We have got everything cleaned out of our room and I have got Tom whitewashing and got things so he can go right ahead with the cleaning, so all I shall do now is look on and see he does it well....I presume everybody at home is beginning to prepare for housecleaning, how I long to be at home once more.²⁹

Women's work rhythms continued on board ship much, I suspect, to the dismay of the conscripted mate who was set to whitewashing to please the captain's wife. Each day seemed to have significance for the homesick Annie who noted on 5th May: "This is the first Friday in May. I long to spend a Friday at home." Similarly, Mary MacDonald of Gore, Hants County, who with her new husband moved to California in 1873, found significance in days of the week: "Sunday always makes me think of home more than any other day," she noted "Sunday was always a pleasant day at home; how I would like

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to be there now."³⁰ Singing hymns on Sunday with fellow migrants helped to wake memories of time and place:

Sunday 7 September (1873)

Sandy Gordon came in the evning and we had a sing.
O, it reminds me so much of home when I hear our
good old tunes sung again that we used to sing away in
the dear old home with brothers and sisters.

Even the seasonal rhythm became more meaningful in the harsh glare of the California sun. When visiting a photographic exhibition, Mary noted:

There was among every variety of other thing some
very handsome engravings--one I thought perfection;
it was a picture of a New England farmhouse and
grounds just after a light skiff of snow had fallen.

A New England landscape in winter was the next best thing to a picture of home.

Migration also made women more dependent upon their husbands, a situation conducive to feelings of helplessness and homesickness. "I feel saddened today on account of my evil disposition last night. To think I could so far lose control of myself and get so angry at my dear husband....I wonder if Rie ever got that angry at Rob," Annie Butler confided to her diary on 6 August 1871. Mary MacDonald finally resorted to poetry to express her loneliness on 10 September 1873:

Farewell my childhood's home and friends
I bid you all adieu
Twas hard to leave my native land
But harder still to part with you
This land seems very strange to me
So different from my own
And I feel so like a stranger here
So far away from home....
I am not sorry that I came
For him I'd go this world around
For husband is the dearest soul
That ere on earth was found
The folks are very good and kind
And the sun is shining bright today
But O I feel so lonely now
Whenever he's away
It must be that I love him so
I feel so different then
When he's away my sunshine's gone
Until he comes home again.

At its worst, empty domestic routines revolved around a husband or father's time. Here I am reminded of Emily Carr's description of her middle class household of the late nineteenth century:

The routine of our childhood home ran with
mechanical precision....

Every evening at quarter to six Mother would say,
"Children, is every gate properly shut and fastened?
Are no toys littering the garden, no dolls sitting on
humans' chairs? Wash your faces, then, and put on
clean pinafores; your father will soon be home....

After Father had fussed over Isabella and eaten a good dinner, he went upstairs to see Mother who was far more often in bed ill than up....He sat beside her bed for half an hour in almost complete silence, then he went downstairs to read his paper till bedtime.³¹

Of course, domesticity in pre-industrial society did not always conform to the ideal any more than it did for young Emily Carr. And like Emily Carr, women in Atlantic Canada found their own ways to survive personal tragedy and pursue intellectual growth. Religious enthusiasm, literary pursuits, female support networks and kinship ties offered assistance when the domestic ideal failed.

Mary Bradley's early nineteenth century prescription for psychological survival in a childless unhappy first marriage was particularly appropriate to her domestic setting:

I contracted a habit of awakening and rising early at the hour of five in the morning, both summer and winter. My place of private devotions was an underground dairy room--which in the winter was used for a cellar for vegetables; protected from the frost by an outhouse over it, with a door to go downstairs--and this was my place of devotion in winter....and when the door was shut down after me, all timidity and fear was dispelled, and my soul would be so happy, and enjoyed so much of the presence of God, that I sometimes felt as if the place was full of happy spirits who met with me.

...With my heart full of love and truly alive to God, I returned from this Bethel to resume my domestic duties with great delight.

Community churches also offered women scope for teaching, social reform and female friendships. Later in the century, Maritime women would use religious conviction to justify the most audacious claims to education and career. "Next to Truro, Bobbili is now the dearest place on earth to me," Mathilda Churchill wrote from her mission station in India where she spent nearly fifty years of her life as a teacher and administrator. "...it is Home in India and home wherever it may be is a loved spot to a woman" she declared somewhat ingenuously.³²

Others, like Phoebe Collins, retreated into "novils" and day dreaming. On 24 October 1815 Phoebe noted:

I don't think I shall git the rheumatism in my fingers for want of exercise, for I have bin in my spinning room all day; now one intrudes on my solitude, my mind has free scope for thinking--if it were not for hope and anticipation, time indeed would pass heavily on.

Margaret Michener, recently widowed, found solace in female friendships, English literature and the natural beauty of the seaboard village of Hantsport in 1850.

I have come tonight to my lonely habitation. It is not the same as it has been all summer, for hope has departed. I was looking forward to winter when Simeon would be home. I took a walk down to the

Halfway River bridge and sat on the fence by the marsh to watch the flowing tide. I sat there till it came all around me as the tides are high--and ebbd again. I read while there Pope's "Messiah" which Simeon had learned and wrote it off for me before we were married. I sounds so like him, I almost think I hear him repeat it. I seem to envy Maria the hope she has of Curry coming home, but why should I? Let me give up and wish others all good success. Maria is here now; my friends are all very kind. I wrote to Rebecca Elder today. I find some consolation in scribbling....

Female friendships are a well documented feature of women's culture. Less studied because they are so obvious are the strong bonds of sibling sisterhood that sustained women in earlier times. Older sisters in large families virtually raised younger children and sisters close in age shared intimacies that were denied even to husbands. "Dear sister Rie's birthday," the seaborne Annie Butler noted on 15 February 1871: "How I would like to be near her. I wonder what she is doing. Frying donuts maybe. Wouldn't I like to have one or two dozen to eat...." On 13 May she pined: "I have got better of my dreary feelings but the desire to see my precious sister is just as strong but I am going to try to be cheerful and patient until I do."

"Sister Lizzie and I had our farewell last night," Mathilda Faulkner Churchill reported before departing for the mission fields in 1873:

Hours we spent together, far into the night, talking over old childhood days at Stewiacke, the girlhood days here in Truro, her sickness and the long weary period of pain and retirement, my teaching and mission work, my wedding-day and the new life now stretching out for me ahead. She was very brave. We did not weep. It was rather a retrospect to record our joys and our mercies, the seal of mutual love.

Letters and even diary exchanges between sisters testify to the special support that siblings provided in good times and bad. Of all the features of women's culture revealed in our sources this the most fleeting as modern family patterns take their toll on natural sisterhood.

Though the domestic ideal in the twentieth century had lost much of its glamour both in the home and in the workplace, women still struggled to keep their domestic networks. Ella Liscombe, who lived with her widowed mother and unmarried sister, found home ownership burdensome not only because of taxes but because the bank manager might conclude that she did not need a raise if she owned her own home. "It would be cheaper to board somewhere," she recorded in her diary on 20 January 1935, "but it is not like having your own home and we are still comfortable and warm."³³

Even more remarkable is the determination of Mary MacQuarrie, mother of twelve, to maintain the bonds among three generations of women, after the death of her husband.

We were left, the younger girls and I, fairly comfortable. However, when the war was over the three girls were married; thus leaving my old mother

and me to face the world. The prospect was not very bright in Glace Bay and I had nobody belonging to me there; I sold all my property and bought a home in Sydney, because I had to make a home for my mother while she lived. When she died four years ago I rented my house, sold all my things and started out to visit my scattered family. I sometimes wish I had kept up my old home, but if I were by myself I wouldn't be able to stand the loneliness after always having a full house, and it would be more than I could bear to have to sit at a lonely table and not have people coming in at night. So here I am, at the age of 74, going about from place to place. At present I'm here with Katie in Halifax. I have been with Ethel in Baltimore, three winters and one summer; and with Flora in Buffalo and Syracuse; and with Alice in Montreal. I hope to be for awhile with Flora in Sydney where she is going to live for the next five years.³⁴

Mary MacQuarrie felt that her place was with her family but her children were scattered all over North America. Moreover, sons no longer took precedence in caring for widowed mothers; only daughters figured in Mary MacQuarrie's wanderings. Clearly, genealogical maps had contracted while family space had expanded far beyond household and community. Despite these challenges, women's support networks continued to re-create themselves and take on new forms. I cannot help wondering, when I think of Helen Maria Grant, Cecilia Spofford and Evelyn Farris, all active workers in the suffrage cause in British Columbia, whether their club activity compensated, in part, for the extended family and friendship networks that they left behind in Nova Scotia.³⁵

The women in our diaries clearly experienced time and place differently than many of us do today. Very few spoke of place in political or even larger geographical terms. Place for most women was represented by home, kin and community, spaces in which women's role was clearly defined and highly valued. Similarly, time was reckoned through the prism of the family and even the time and place of work were assigned according to the gender role expectations of daughters, mothers and widows. As has been noted elsewhere, 'timely' action in the nineteenth century consisted of helpful responses in times of crises rather than adherence to a schedule; and, for women, personal life course decisions were directed by family expectations long after most men began to make choices based on individual and economic considerations.³⁶

These generalizations are obviously not valid for all women at all times. Even certain women in Atlantic Canada--native Indian, Acadian and upper class women for instance--would not always conform to such norms. However, given the close ties with New England and their high level of literacy, Anglo-Saxon women in Atlantic Canada eagerly subscribed to the cult of domesticity as the production and reproduction of the domestic sphere increasingly became the exclusive preserve of women in the nineteenth century.³⁷ Since all of the women cited above were products of this culture their devotion to the domestic ideal is not surprising. Not only were they

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urged to conform to it by prescriptive literature, novels and community standards; they were taught it by their mothers' example. However, the post-Second World War generation of women would move into the labour force in larger numbers and the welfare state would shoulder some of the burden of domesticity. A casualty of this process and the revolution in communications which accompanied it was the custom of diary keeping and the art of private letter writing—the very sources which, for over a century, chronicled the fate of so many women in Atlantic Canada.



Footnotes

Portions of this paper will be incorporated in a forthcoming book entitled *Recording Angels, Diaries of Nova Scotia Women, 1775-1939* written in collaboration with Donna E. Smyth and Toni Laidlaw.

1. See, for instance, Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Diana Gittens, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-39* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow, 1981); Beth Light and Alison Prentice, eds., *Pioneer and Gentlewomen of British North America, 1713-1867* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1980); Beth Light and Joy Parr, eds., *Canadian Women on the Move, 1867-1920* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press and OISE, 1983).
2. Gayle Kimball, ed., *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981): 3.
3. Eliane Leslau Silverman, "Writing Canadian Women's History, 1970-82: an Historiographical Analysis" *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. LXIII, No. 4 (December 1982): 521.
4. Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice, "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History," *Atlantis*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring 1982): 43.
5. Mary O'Brien et al., "Feminism and Education: A Critical Review Essay," *Resources for Feminist Research*, Vol. XII, No. 3 (Nov. 1983): 6.
6. Eds., Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard (Toronto: Women's Press, 1974).
7. Eds., Marie Lavigne, Jennifer Stoddart, Micheline Dumont and Michèle Jean (Montreal: Les Quinze, 1982).
8. Eds., Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980).
9. Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Sylvia Van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties": *Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980); Susan Jackel, *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982); Eliane Leslau Silverman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1984); Meg Luxton, *More than A Labour of Love* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980).
10. Comparative regional analysis offers a particularly valuable approach to women's history. See, for example, Claudette Lacelle, "Les domestiques dans les villes canadiennes au XIX siècle: effectifs et conditions de vie," *Histoire Sociale*, Vol. XV, No. 29 (Mai 1982), pp. 181-207; Gordon Darroch and Michael Ornstein, "Family Life-Cycles, Occupations and Networks of Mutual Aid," *Historical Papers*, (Canadian Historical Association: Vancouver, 1983): 30-55.
11. John Garner, *The Franchise and Politics in British North America, 1755-1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969): 155-56.
12. Sarah Frost, "Diary" published in Walter Bates, *Kingston and the Loyalists of 1783* ed., W. O. Raymond 1889 rept. (Woodstock: Non-entity Press, 1980): 26-30.
13. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1980).
14. Margaret Conrad, *Recording Angels: The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1750-1950* (Ottawa: CRIAW, 1982); Donna Smyth, "Mothers, Grandmothers and Young Wives Tales," unpublished play based on "Recording Angels" chronicles.
15. Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Micmac Quillwork* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum, 1982).
16. Alan A. Brookes, "Out-migration from the Maritimes, 1860-1900: Some

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- Preliminary Considerations," *Acadiensis*, Vol. V, No. 2 (Spring 1976), pp. 25-55; "The Golden Age and the Exodus: The Case of Canning, Kings County," *Acadiensis*, Vol. XI, No. 1. (Autumn 1981), pp. 57-82; Patricia Thornton "Some Preliminary Comments on the Extent and Consequences of Out-Migration from the Atlantic Region, 1870-1920," in Lewis R. Fischer and Eric Sager, eds., *Merchant Shipping and Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's: Memorial University, 1982).
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 19. Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).
 20. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Phoebe Collins Diary, 1815-16.
 21. Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton, Mary Smith Diary, 1891.
 22. Acadia University Archives, Rebecca Ells Diary, 1901-05.
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 26. Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton, Ella Liscombe Diaries, 1915-1938.
 27. Private, Hannah Richardson diary, 1872; Private, Lucie Borden diary, 1905-09.
 28. On shoemakers in Lynn see Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).
 29. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Annie Butler Diary, 1871.
 30. Private, Mary MacDougall MacDonald Mason Diary, 1873.
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 32. Mrs. George Churchill, *Letters from My Home in India* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1916): 92.
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